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Post-Internet as Post-Apparatus

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Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-114472>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Weiberg, Birk (2015). Post-Internet as Post-Apparatus. *Studia culturae*, 23:141-154.

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ПОСТ-ИНТЕРНЕТ КАК ПОСТ-АППАРАТ

Статья предлагает альтернативное прочтение искусства направления «Пост-Интернет» как явления, более близкого к фотографии, чем к «Нет-арту» поздних 1990-х. Фотографические практики играют важную роль в многих произведениях «Пост-Интернет» и могут сказать больше о современном состоянии фотографии, чем сама фотография. Художник, о котором идёт речь в статье, обращается к теме цифровой фотографии как объекта, документальной роли фотографии в связи с арт-практиками за пределами фотографии, и влиянии Интернета на вернакулярную фотографию. В статье делается попытка переосмыслить понимание камеры как аппарата посредством рассмотрения двух современных произведений, не относящихся к искусству «Пост-Интернета», как его обычно понимают, а также посредством обращения к фактографическому движению советского искусства и к теоретическим работам Вилема Флюссера.

Ключевые слова: фотография, пост-фотография, пост-Интернет, аппарат, В.Флюссер.

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POST-INTERNET AS POST-APPARATUS

In my paper I want suggest an alternative reading of Post-Internet art that asks for its relationship to photography rather than to the net.art of the late 1990s. Photographic practices play a crucial role in many Post-Internet works and possibly reveal more about the current state of photography than photography itself. The artists discussed here address issues such as the status of the digital photograph as an object, the documentary role of photography in relation to non-photographic art practices, and the effects of the Internet on vernacular photography. In a second step I try to rethink our understanding of the camera as an apparatus. I do so by looking at two works that are contemporary with but do not belong to Post-Internet art as it is usually conceived and by drawing on the Soviet movement of factography and the writings of Vilém Flusser.

Keywords: Photography, Post-Photography, Post-Internet, Apparatus, V. Flusser

1. Post-Internet

Post-Internet art is usually defined in contrast to net.art as both movements already in their denominations refer to the technical infrastructure that they are closely related to. What distinguishes them—in brief—is the role that the Internet plays for the artists and their works. For net.art the Internet is the principle medium where art is made, shown, and perceived and that it reflects upon. Post-Internet, on the other hand, regards the net as a *conditio sine qua non*, a naturalized ground on which mostly sculptural works are build. I will not elaborate on the discussions between these two groups and the question which of the two approaches is adequate to use the Internet for the arts. I will rather use Post-Internet pragmatically as an umbrella term for similar practices of artists mostly born after 1985, growing up with the Internet instead of colonizing it as new territory, and who would not all adjoin their classification as members of this tribe [3; 7; 13, p. 121-134].

Post-Internet is usually not discussed as an answer to the question of Post-Photography but I want to suggest here to consider it in this discourse not only due to the shared prefix but because photographic practices are a crucial part of it. Post-Internet art can help us to understand that the crisis of photography lies actually in our understanding of it as a self-sufficient medium with specific dispositifs rather than a network of transformative practices primarily by means of optics and lately electronics. This becomes most apparent, as I can hopefully show, by a new understanding of the camera apparatus.

2. Post-Photography

Young photographers today often display a certain discomfort with the photo as a result of their work. An example for this is a series of digital images—still and moving—by Swiss artists Emanuel Rossetti. With others of his generation Rossetti shares an interest in complex patterns and structures as they can be found in metamorphic rocks like marble or quartzite. A straight photographic representation of such a natural phenomenon could be righteously regarded as one of the most banal or literally superficial motives of photography. Rossetti, a photographer by training, uses such photos as textures for an equally banal 3-D torus or, as we might also say, a donut. The original photographic images are refused objecthood by means of printing them but

instead are warped into an equally virtual object, the flying donut. Necessarily, these operations have to result in images themselves. Rossetti produces prints and videos that show his textured objects in front of another non-image, popular among his peers, the gradient. Photography here is no longer used as a technique but depicted as a subject. Since starting this series in 2009, Rossetti has moved on to sound and installation projects but still uses the donuts as a signature in exhibitions¹. His shift from photography to other techniques, still including photography as an option, is exemplary for many young artists.



Fig. 1: Emanuel Rossetti, *Untitled*, 2009-2010, Epson DuraBrite print, A0.

The focus of Post-Internet art on the production of sculptural objects at first glance must seem iconoclastic just as Rossetti's deformations of the photographic image. One of the founding exhibitions of the field, the 2009 *AFK Sculpture Park* at Atelierhof Kreuzberg in Berlin, likewise seems to have little to do with photography and to focus entirely on the actual event as sculptural as much as social. The acronym AFK, standing for "away from

¹An example would be his solo show *Delay Dust* last year at the Kunsthalle Bern, an immersive installation with red carpets and sound where a small donut still was the only image [20].

keyboard,” suggests that all that matters is happening at the venue where the works are presented. Real life and objects as a counter draft to the flood of digital images and social networks one might say. But the relationships between the factitious items, which meanwhile have found their ways into commercial galleries, and photographic practices are more eclectic and have been critically commented. The artist Huw Lemmey thus writes: “Sometimes it can appear though that IRL shows, where people display visual artefacts, are remnants, poor excuses for social networks to circulate around online, third places” [11]. AFK and IRL (in real life) are no alternatives to the Internet but suspensions of the same. And photography is essential to connect either artist-run spaces or white cubes with the Internet and its alternative public.

In the course of swaying between these two modes of existence both, photography and the white cube, can take unusual forms as we can see from Rafaël Rozendaal’s piece *Broken Self* that was shown at the *AFK Sculpture Park*². In front of two three-sidedly walled dump spaces a large amount of empty glass bottles is arranged in two circles. In the right front corner of each booth a lamp is looking into the emptiness. As we can see in a documentary video, the lamps are actually strobe lights and the sculpture later turned into a performance site when people started to throw the bottles into the two open containers. Their actions are apparently driven by the effect that is created by the bursting glass in the series of flashes coming from the strobe lights. The flashes freeze the otherwise hardly perceivable fragmentation of the bottles in a series of ephemeral photographs. And while the strobe lights operate independent from the performers, it is the latter’s repetitive action that reminds of our own photographic practices with smart phones and online sharing sites where the act of taking a photo is more important than preserving it. The impression of the open spaces that catch glass and light to be at the same time cameras, photo studios, and white cubes is fostered by a show at the Spencer Brownstone Gallery in New York the following year where Rozendaal merges these three different spaces much more obviously in his participatory installation.

3. Exhibiting Online

The number of people who saw the *AFK Sculpture Park* during its one week run should be quite limited. This and other shows’ relevance derives from their presentations on online platforms like the suspended VVORK or the more recent Contemporary Art Daily [22; 19]. Documentation of shows with high resolution photos

²This is not to be mixed with his web project of the same title that it freely adopts [18]. A documentation of the work discussed here can be found at [21].

and original videos has become so rich that the two only reasons to visit the galleries (and also the two standard allegations against Post-Internet art) are to meet people at the opening or to buy works later. The social and commercial aspects appear to be more relevant than aesthetic ones. The works themselves—despite of their common claims for materiality—offer in fact little that cannot be conveyed online [7]. This raises questions regarding the ontology of the artworks. We find ourselves in a similar situation as with performance art in the 1970s that was and is primarily accessible through photographs that only serve secondary functions.



Fig. 2: Artie Vierkant, *Image Objects*, 2011 - ongoing, UV prints on Dibond, altered documentation images.

Post-Internet artists like Artie Vierkant are not only fully aware of this simmering dilemma of documentation but use it actively in their work. Vierkant's ongoing series *Image Objects* consists of Photoshop artefacts like overlapping color gradients that are UV printed on Dibond composite boards. This technical reference to practices of commercial photography is subverted not only by the abstract motives but also by the idiosyncratic shapes that result from overlapping rectangles. Once they are mounted on the gallery walls Vierkant documents his works in situ only to sophisticate these photographs with the same tools he used to produce the objects. In Photoshop he adds gradients, clones image areas, or adds scaled alternative views in a

way that we no longer can distinguish the different types of artefacts. In this potentially endless alternation of image production and processing the actual objects and the gallery situations collapse. Adequately, Vierkant defines the "Image Object" in an essay as a piece that leaves visual representation behind [15]. His documentation practice in fact responds to a question, originally raised by digital photography in the 1990s; i.e., at which point of the photographic process an image is actually created if it is detached from the situation of exposure. The computer as the device of post-production seemed to have replaced the camera as the device that used to define photography. But instead of simply leaving the camera aside and turn to photographic paintings and virtual photograms, as photographers like Jeff Wall or Thomas Ruff did, Vierkant uses his narrowing loops of depiction and distortion to strangle the photographic apparatus.

4. White Cube Photography

Similar questions have to be asked regarding the work of Katja Novitskova, a paragon of Post-Internet practice that likewise features a special relationship to photography. Like many others since the *Picture Generation* of the 1970s³ the artist does not make photos but rather collects provocatively vacuous photos online, transforms them into objects that then can be sold as decorative commodities. Looking at the documentations of her exhibitions, it strikes that her image objects, made with the same technique as those of Vierkant but presented free-standing, are usually photographed straight on. No parallax or other optical transformations interfere with the motives themselves. Like with Vierkant's *Image Objects* the mode of documentation here apparently runs contrary to the averred objecthood. When Novitskova knocks out the original backgrounds of her found images in the computer, she could easily replace them with depictions of the generic white cubes where she shows her work. Even the reflections her objects leave on the polished gallery floors do not establish a linkage between photo and physical space but remind of standardized effects of contemporary presentation software such as Apple's *Keynote*.

³Artists like Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and others started to appropriate mass media images. The term *Picture Generation* refers to an influential exhibition and later article by Douglas Crimp [16].

exactly this superfluity of the presentation that not only adds another level of irony beyond renowned critical image appropriation but also opens up a space for alternative photographic practices. As New York's DIS collective has demonstrated in a photo series, Novitskova's image objects provoke visitors to unmask them by contrasting them with real people [4]. Their attraction, so it seems, lies neither in being photos nor sculptures but in being photo opportunities. Such situations that provoke snapshots by amateurs are as old as amateur photography itself but only in the last two decades more or less dedicated photo opportunities have emerged in the context of contemporary art⁴. Patrons documenting their visit of an exhibition and posting the photos online for many art venues have become an integral part of their marketing and curatorial practices.

Later in 2012 on the occasion of Art Basel Miami, DIS launched an independent project that picked up and pushed the popularity of one genre of museum photography, the self-portrait with artworks. The definitions of artselfies vary from Brian Droitcour's strict understanding that demands an active role of the depicted artwork e.g. by means of reflecting surfaces [6] or an open definition that includes any portrait of either oneself or others in an art context. DIS initially presented a website that automatically aggregates photos with the hashtag #artselfie. The fact that it was the amateur photographers themselves who tagged their photos as artselfies, without necessarily knowing that this made them part of a collection of public interest, is a process that reminds of the self-discovery of Post-Internet art itself. (In the latter case a standard objection is that the term as a buzz word existed first and was only gradually filled with meaning by the artists later—a modus operandi that runs contrary to the procedures of art historians and therefore arouses opposition.) A selection of the photos, together with a discussion of the term #artselfie, was later published in book form.

The discussion of artselfies is still dominated by questions of vanity and whether selfie sticks in museums endanger the artworks or the soundness of the art experience of others. What is usually neglected is that the practice of artselfies has changed the position of the camera as shown in two diagrams from the before mentioned book. The first places the camera between an active observer and the photographed work of art as the photographic subject. The apparatus here is a medium in the most literal sense and agency

⁴A starting point here might be the popularization of art events through former advertiser Charles Saatchi and the Young British Art in the mid-1990s.

agency travels in one direction only. The second diagram shows the production situation of an artselfie where we find the photographer between his or her camera and the art piece, which is degraded to the background of the new, nascent artefact [5, p. 56-59]. This assembly with its bidirectional relation between camera and photographer/subject should be read in a different and less static way than the old one. It is not a Ptolemaic counterrevolution that puts humans again in the center of an otherwise rotating system as maybe DIS have in mind and as a general blame for the conceitedness of selfies suggests. On the contrary, it shows that none of the elements still can rely on a fixed position. New applications of technology create new dispositifs. And while in the process of creating them, humans do play crucial roles, they not necessarily occupy these in the resulting structures.



Fig. 3: DIS, *Competing Images*, 2012, photo by Marco Roso and Lauren Boyle with Katja Novitskova, *Innate Disposition*, 2012.

5. Camera Networks

The beforehand mentioned disappearance of the camera is a deception caused by an overcome static understanding of media. Cameras, of course, do not disappear. They watch us while we are riding the subway, on the streets, and from the sky. Many of us carry at least two of them with us right now in our cell phones and computers and maybe even as an old-fashioned dedicated

device. The impression of cameras transforming instead of vanishing is also caused by their reemergence in a lot of recent works that are not related to Post-Internet art and of which I just want to mention two shortly. The documentary *Leviathan* (2012) by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel captures the process of deep-sea fishery in unprecedented images. Looking for cameras that were practicable on board, the two ethnographers turned to GoPros designed for extreme sports, which proved to be light, stable, and cheap enough to place them in extreme positions and situations. With their odd perspectives the resulting images remind strongly of the photographic work of Alexander Rodchenko in the late 1920s. And this similarity is more than a matter of style. Rodchenko's idiosyncratic perspectives were a clear statement against an anthropocentric episteme that his contemporary Sergei Tret'iakov damned in regard to what he saw as the idealistic and bourgeois tradition of the novel. Tret'iakov breasts this with his demand for "The Biography of the Object" that is not supposed to replace the depiction of humans but rather to put them in a different perspective [1, p. 66-70; 14, p. 57-62]. Both, Tret'iakov and Rodchenko, here represent the approach of factography propagated by the Soviet journal *Novyi LEF* nearly a hundred years ago that might serve as a point of departure in issues we face with photography today.

Factography in regard to photography has to be seen as more than just a specific style but rather as a superseding practice. This is at least the case if we advance the conception of the camera beyond what was originally developed in *Novyi LEF*. To elucidate this point, I come to my second example, the project *Delivery for Mr. Assange* by !Mediengruppe Bitnik. In January 2013, the artists prepared a parcel that—while on its way to WikiLeaks activist Julian Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy in London—in regular intervals sent photos and GPS data that were published in real time in the Internet [17]. Bitnik have described their project as a test of various systems, a "real world ping."⁵ Just as Tret'iakov had suggested, we follow a thing that—beyond giving Assange at the end a voice and the possibility to distribute his political messages—provides us with a profile of different systems like the security architecture around the inmate or the postal system and its employees. The cardboard box, which contains a camera, a hacked cell phone, and batteries,

⁵Ping is one of the most basic software utilities that is used to verify the reachability of another computer on the Internet.

is itself a camera, a mobile camera obscura, in a different sense. It is a construction by the artists that is at the same time technical, aesthetical, and social and that has to be seen as performative rather than functional. Tret'iakov had addressed his concept primarily to writers who should describe an object on its way and in its changing constellations. The Bitnik camera performs its own writing by recording images and location data that is supplemented by the artists and independent observers when appending comments via social media.



Fig. 4: !Mediengruppe Bitnik, *Delivery for Mr. Assange*, 2013, live mail art.

6. Post-Apparatus

As I have tried to show, the current issue of photography is not the loss of its indexicality due to digital technology. Indexicality is not a simple semiotic (or causal) relationship but part of a larger network that artists establish with optical and other means. And what we can learn from contemporary art practices is that for various reasons (technical, social, economic) photographic translations have become increasingly difficult to isolate among others. And possibly this isolation through concepts like medium specificity has always been a chimera of materialist aesthetic theory. In a critical comment on Walter Benjamin's artwork essay Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour have written in regard to Benjamin's contraposition of acting in theater and film:

“The movie camera adds another mediation to an already long chain, but it does not cut it; an actor’s presence in the studio is neither more nor less real than on stage, and there is as much technique in both kinds of acting” [9, p. 94]. When Latour disperses the medium to the benefit of mediation, he extricates mediality from the domains of either human signification or automated sign transmission into the much wider field of agency that equates humans and non-humans.

Artist/theorist Hito Steyerl has described the function of a modern cell phone camera that collects primarily data noise that is then compared with previous photos in order to render a representational image. The latent images of analogue photography are replaced by latent data. This shift opens up the field for new kinds of translations through proxies, as Steyerl calls them. “Proxies are devices or scripts tasked with getting rid of noise as well as the bot armies hell-bent on producing it. They are masks, persons, avatars, routers, nodes, templates, or generic placeholders. They share an element of unpredictability—which is all the more paradoxical considering that they arise as result of maxed out probabilities”[13]. A proxy in that sense is similar to what Bruno Latour has defined as mediator [10, p. 39]. Thus cameras and images both can be conceived as parts of dynamic networks. None of them can still lay claim to a central and static position of power.

This directly affects our understanding of the apparatus as an object. A useful analysis of the camera as an apparatus comes from Vilém Flusser who distinguishes between pre-industrial tools, industrial machines, and the post-industrial apparatus. The camera for him is historically the first apparatus and for that reason marks the beginning of the post-industrial period. Materialism, as a monism rooted in industrialization, cannot help to understand photography, as we could argue with Flusser, as photography is no longer part of an industrial regime of machines but introduces a mutual penetration of operators and devices. “Unlike manual workers surrounded by their tools and industrial workers standing at their machines, photographers are inside their apparatus and bound up with it” [8, p. 27]. The camera as every apparatus comes with its own program, its set of rules, that affect its operator and run contrary to the notion of the camera as a self-contained entity. Instead it has to be understood as self-referential. Apparatus and operator are united in a feedback loop that in the case of photography is supposed to create ever “better” pictures. This trajectory meanwhile has reached a point that goes beyond what Flusser had in mind.

The destabilization of physical devices that occurs parallel but not necessarily due to digitization has to be understood as a shift of photography from apparatus to practice. The programs have started to free themselves from their hosts. As we have seen with *Broken Self*, photographic practices have found embodiments that no longer require the apparatus of the camera as we know it. Jean Baudrillard has described this process in regard to other phenomena that use their dissolution to their own advantage as simulation and virus⁶. So the apparatus as a post-apparatus, as I finally want to suggest, is no longer a matter of fact but a matter of concern [10, p. 87-120], a focal point of practices rather than a monument of knowledge and ideology.

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⁶Baudrillard exemplifies this when he writes that the end of the Soviet Union did not mark the defeat but the victory of its political ideas that no longer could were confined behind the iron curtain. "A communism which dissolves itself is a successful communism"[2, p. 40].

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